THE FIERCE GODS OF SAN AGUSTIN

Unique among aboriginal artworks are these 300 stone giants, squat human forms with beastlike snouts, overlapping fangs and expressions of unwithering ferocity.

By Frank Volkmann

Figure of jaguar god holds necklace made from human skull. Some of these are shown sacrificing a human child.

Guarding underground temple entrance is squat figure of jaguar god. This cult was widely diffused in ancient America.

Scientists have no clues to origins of some 300 gigantic stone figures found in the heart of the Colombian massif.

THE POOR, sleepy village of San Agustin lies near the headwaters of the Rio Magdalena deep in the heart of the Andean highlands of southwestern Colombia. Remote and isolated, the village would be completely unknown to the modern world were it not for the fact that it stands at the center of the most extraordinary archaeological mystery, or series of mysteries, to be found anywhere on the South American continent.

In the deep, almost impenetrable forests surrounding this ancient village there are at the present time no fewer than 30 major archaeological sites, each one consisting of a bewildering array of large earthen tumuli, underground shrines, stone-lined tunnels and burial chambers, monolithic sarcophagi and — most remarkable of all — colossal carved stone figures of strange-looking gods whose only rivals in this hemisphere are the Easter Island statues and the giant Olmec heads of Mexico.

Archaeologists from several different countries have been working intermittently at these sites for more than 40 years, gradually uncovering a vast cultural complex which extends over several hundred square miles. Its exact limits cannot be fixed with certainty, for the area is densely overgrown and new discoveries are continually being made.

Most authorities agree that the outstanding characteristics of this culture are its architectural features and its monumental stone sculptures. The

latter are astonishing, not simply because of their size (some of them are more than 20 feet high and weigh more than 15 tons) but because of their extraordinary execution. For some mysterious reason the ancient sculptors of San Agustin sought to invest the images of their gods with a ferocious, even terrifying character. They gave them vacant, sightless orbs for eyes, put long pointed fangs in their mouths, extended their lips into hideous grimaces and even depicted them in the act of devouring naked children. It is unnerving to look upon these awesome figures. Who were the people whose inner vision impelled them to transform such nightmare images into stone?

The first person to give an accurate description of these now-famous figures was a Spanish monk named Juan de Santa Gertrudis. He was traveling across the Colombian Andes in 1757 when he stopped at San Agustin and decided to spend the night. A priest from the village mission engaged the friar in conversation about local goings-on and particularly about a recent epidemic of treasure-hunting in the surrounding jungles. The priest said that ancient tombs and temples had been found, some of which had yielded objects made of gold.

Friar Juan was intrigued by these tales. Early the next morning, before his Indian carriers arose, he set out into the nearby jungle to have a look. He was deeply impressed by the great stone images standing like grim sentinels over fallen temple altars and strange underground passageways. But how, he wondered, could such works be accounted for? It was obvious that they were older by far than the missions of St. Francis or even the Spanish conquest. Yet the Indians did not have iron tools for stone carving and certainly lacked the technical proficiency required to erect the huge statues. The only answer, Friar Juan reasoned, was that the images and temples were the work of the devil. Perhaps the Evil One had reared them in anticipation of Christianity, to confound Christ's true ministers and to forestall the American infidels' receiving the message of salvation.

Friar Juan's naively-written account was never published and when he died in 1799 his manuscript was deposited

Infant's moon-shaped headdress leads some scholars to believe figure may have had astronomical significance.

Mace-bearing figure of ancient god, warrior or ancestor (no one knows which) guards one of many earthen mounds near isolated village of San Agustin.

in the archives in the public library in his hometown (Santa Gertrudis, Mexico), where it lay undisturbed for two centuries except for the ravages of time. The tattered manuscript was discovered only a few years ago.

In the next half-century several other travelers, all of them missionaries, briefly mentioned the monuments and in 1853 an Italian geographer mapping the region had some drawings made of the largest and most impressive figures. Not until 1913, however, was any scientific or systematic examination of the site undertaken. In that year a German archaeologist, Dr. Konrad Theodor Preuss of Berlin's Museum fur Volkerkunde, began large-scale excavations. His large, profusely-illustrated report brought the San Agustin figures to the attention of the scientific world. Since then there have been sporadic expeditions to the sites to search for more statues and temples.

Preuss' two-volume report, which is still a major source work, was translated into Spanish by a young professor of archaeology at Bogota University named Herman von Walde-Waldegg. He became fascinated by this newly discovered Indian culture

and decided to take up the work which Preuss had left unfinished. He arrived in San Agustin early in 1932 at a time when many of the figures, often broken and defaced, still lay in the native villages. When he first approached the area, he wrote, "My eyes lighted upon something that almost made me fall off my horse. . . . In the dirt and grass of a meadow lay two heavy figures of carved stone. . . . Each was about as tall as a man. With their long jaguar eyeteeth and broad noses, they looked like something out of a nightmare, but to me as an archaeologist they were infinitely beautiful."

Like previous visitors to San Agustin, von Walde-Waldegg was astounded by the size of the figures and puzzled by their enigmatic character. When he made inquiries in the native settlements the inhabitants told him that the figures always had lain where they were found and hinted darkly that it might bode ill for anyone to disturb them. Although nominally Christian, the natives regarded the figures with a curious mixture of religious reverence and superstitious dread.

During the course of his work at San Agustin, von Walde-Waldegg made several notable discoveries. The first occurred while he was unearthing an underground temple some miles from the main site. He turned up several large flagstones which were covered with engravings of constellations, including the Southern Cross and representations of the moon in various phases. These singular artifacts suggested that the ancient San Agustinians not only took a keen interest in astronomical matters but also had developed a method of time calculation.

Soon thereafter he made another find that seemed to have astronomical import. This was a carved stone in the shape of a fanged female with a naked child seated in her lap. The child wore a headdress in the shape of a crescent moon. The statue was unique; it caught the attention of the native workers who took it to be a magical image of the ancient mother goddess. Young girls and women came from miles around to touch and caress and even to converse with this figure, presumably in the hope of assuring an easy childbirth or of shaking off the curse of sterility. Von Walde-Waldegg himself believed the figure was a symbolic representation of "day holding the new moon."

Von Walde-Waldegg spent two seasons at San Agustin, excavating a total of 142 stone figures, several large temples and innumerable tombs. Since the early 1930's other expeditions have expanded the site for many miles in all directions, uncovered 100 additional figures and found so many underground temples and tombs that even today they have not all been adequately examined.

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WHAT DO scientists have to say about this extraordinary carved stonework? The fact is that most reports published up to this time are little more than catalogues of artifacts and statues and architectural descriptions of tombs and temples. The main questions raised by the San Agustin complex remain unanswered:

Where did the builders derive the inspiration for their monuments so unlike the work of the Incas and other Indian cultures of South America?

Where did they acquire their advanced skills and craftsmanship?

What is the meaning of their religion and the nature of the strange gods they worshiped?

Finally, what ultimately became of this people and their culture?

Dr. Gerardo Reichel-Domatoff, an archaeologist associated with Bogota University, believes that many of the problems connected with San Agustin have been caused by the frantic scramble for artifacts and statues. He is distressed that archaeologists, seeking museum exhibits, have neglected the problems of stratigraphy and typology. "Even now," he laments, "after years of digging, the major questions of origins, chronology and external relationships are largely a matter of conjecture."

There is one aspect of San Agustin around which no mystery clings and that is the source of the builders' raw material. Gigantic boulders of andesite and basalt are everywhere in this region of the Andean cordillera. To construct the temples and burial shrines these boulders were roughly worked into large slabs and blocks, then set into low conical earthen mounds approximately 100 feet in diameter and 16 feet in height. The tombs were built of vertical stone slabs set like heavy columns and roofed over with thinner slabs.

A large central crypt has been found in some mounds, apparently where important personages were to be interred. This was approached through a stone-lined underground gallery. Anthropomorphic stone carvings, perhaps representations of tribal gods, have been found in these galleries where acts of worship also may have been performed. On the walls of the sepulchral chambers faint traces of geometric designs in various colors can still be seen and these suggest that an elaborate and richly developed cult of the dead once prevailed here.

At the entrances to the underground temples or standing apart from them either singly or in groups are the large stone figures for which San Agustin is so well known. A total of 320 of these have been catalogued and they occur in great stylistic variety. Some figures are rough-hewn, their shapes, whether human or animal, only superficially developed. Others, carved in the round, show that their creators were true masters of the art of stone carving.

The creatures or beings represented by the carvings vary widely. There are squatting animals, serpent-eating eagles, man alligators, helmeted warriors with maces and shields (some of these have secondary figures emerging from their heads), females with elaborate headdresses and — most remarkable of all — squat human forms with beastlike snouts, overlapping fangs and expressions of unwithering ferocity.

Although the symbols and imagery in these strange creations have counterparts in other Indian cultures, for the most part they are unique among aboriginal artworks of the hemisphere. Experts cannot agree on what they represent or signify. Figures which are obviously anthropomorphic have been variously interpreted as war gods, rain gods, moon gods, bat gods, gods of the underworld, etc. Scholars now generally concede that the snarling fanged

images — a popular motif — represent the jaguar god whose cult was widely diffused in ancient America.

One remarkable group of carvings depicts a grotesque human figure, apparently a priest or god, engaged in the act of devouring or, more likely, sacrificing a naked human child. Dr. Preuss believed that this figure represented the sun-god but other scholars have thought that it might be a priest of the jaguar cult. Certainly this gruesome imagery, which is widespread and persistent at San Agustin, suggests a cult of human sacrifice. It may not have existed on the same scale as that of the Aztecs but undoubtedly was inspired by the same motives. Scholars, however, were reluctant to draw this comparison simply on the evidence of one group of carvings. Then in 1932, during the course of opening a large earthen mound, von Walde-Waldegg discovered a dramatic new piece of evidence which soon dispelled all doubts.

In the central section of the mound, a large and impressive block of stone came to light. It was carved in shallow relief on three sides in the shape of a reptile — apparently a representation of the alligator god. The top of the stone was flat except for a depression about six feet long which had been cut into its surface. It was immediately clear that this depression once held human victims who were sacrificed in some unknown but surely bloody manner. In the bottom of the depression an aperture had been cut to allow the victims' blood to escape into a narrow channel which ran along the side of the stone and emptied, finally, directly into the god's gaping jaws!

Von Walde-Waldegg records that the significance of this carving was not lost on the native diggers who soon fell into mute and sullen contemplation. "We can only imagine," the archaeologist commented, "the religious fervor accompanying the scenes of sacrifice which probably centered around this stone. The civilized mind needs no graphic portrayal to sense the horror of the custom . . . . The ancient people of San Agustin probably kept this grim figure in evidence as a reminder through their daily lives of the ultimate demand their deity might make and as a gruesome stimulant to mob hysteria when the ceremonies were under way."

Another notable group of carvings has been found on the cliff walls and rocks of a mountain stream near the main village at Alto de Lavapatas. Here singular pictures are carved in relief on the surfaces of large flat boulders lying in the streambed. In one of these, three square pools excavated into the rock are connected by meandering channels which permit the water to flow over the pictures before cascading into each pool. The surfaces of the adjoining rocks are decorated with a bewildering maze of figures including snakes, lizards, frogs and human beings, some carved in relief, others merely scratched into the volcanic rock. The carvers obviously put considerable work into this complex picture gallery but *why* they did so remains a mystery.

Still other puzzling carvings are figures which have "doubles" — secondary figures sprouting from their heads or crouched on their backs. Archaeologists sometimes refer to these as "alter ego statues" but they do not generally agree on their meaning. Some see them as tutelary spirits of warriors, others as symbols representing the primary aspects of a god, and yet others as ritual masks and disguises.

One of the factors that impedes an understanding of this art is our lack of knowledge of the artists themselves. We have only some general facts about the life and manners of the ancient San Agustinians. We know that they were farmers who cultivated maize, squash, beans and various root crops and they lived in small groups in circular wooden houses at scattered hilltop sites. They fashioned a rather drab pottery, simple in both design and decoration, and they made and wore small pieces of fine gold jewelry. We know little else.

We can infer the style of their dress from the statues, and from the artifacts and various household appurtenances recovered from the sites we can deduce some general facts about their domestic activities. But the inner life of the people, their thought and spiritual outlook remain hidden from us and perhaps always will. Any reconstruction of their religion and its strange symbolism, therefore, must be speculative and tentative.

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RADIOCARBON readings of 550 B. C. have been obtained from most of the sites. This date, according to the chronology of the foremost authorities, marks the beginning of the Lower Mesitas Period, which ended about A. D. 425. Within this span of almost 1000 years archaeologists have assigned such developments as the beginnings of metallurgy, the cultivation of maize, the creation of shaft graves with lateral chambers, and the making of monochrome pottery with incised decoration. The next period, the Middle Mesitas, postulated between A. D. 425 and A. D. 1180, is characterized by colossal stone carvings, urn burials and the construction of burial mounds and monolithic sarcophagi. The pottery tradition remains essentially the same as in the preceding period but new and more sophisticated techniques developed in gold metallurgy.

This archaeological sequence encompassing nearly two millennia provides only the meagerest outline of cultural developments. The major task of archaeologists in the future will be to break down the different periods into smaller units and to fill in the details. However, in the meantime they are satisfied to have at least a rough chronology with which to work.

Current research indicates that the initial phase of the San Agustin culture began about 1000 B. C. — not in the mountains of southwestern Colombia, however, but in the eastern plains and jungles where the jaguar cult probably originated. Subsequently groups from this culture penetrated into the area of San Agustin where they established homesteads and began the cultivation of maize. In the oldest levels of the archaeological sites scientists can trace the crude beginnings of gold metallurgy, pottery art and stone carving. The fine gold jewelry for which pre-Hispanic Colombia is world-renowned and the monumental carved figures are developments of a later period.

Recently scholars have speculated that the artisans of San Agustin and those of other cultures of inter-Andean Colombia and coastal Peru and Ecuador received a strong stimulus from the early civilizations of Mesoamerica. They point to recent archaeological discoveries, particularly on the Pacific Coast of Colombia, which suggest a long-range maritime trade network with Mexico sometime prior to 500 B. C.

If such contacts actually took place it is debatable whether they occurred over a long enough period or were strong and consistent enough to have influenced cultural developments. Yet at least one authority, Dr. Michael Coe, a Yale University archaeologist, claims to discern parallels in the art style of the Olmecs of Mexico and the Chavin culture of Peru which he thinks would be difficult to account for on the basis of any other theory.

The Chavin culture, which dates to approximately the same period as the Olmecs (1200 B. C. to 900 B. C.), has long been suspected of influencing the religious and artistic development of San Agustin but no definite link between the two cultures has yet been established. In the Chavin and Olmec cultures as at San Agustin, religious life centered on a jaguar-obsessed cult and a powerful cult of the dead.

Speculations such as these, however, are entertained by only a few specialists and have not been received with much enthusiasm by other members of the scholarly fraternity. There seems to be a general recognition that theories of cultural origins and relationships based on superficial resemblances such as art motifs, myths, etc., are easy to construct and difficult to prove. The scientists who have been most involved in the work at San Agustin continue to stress conventional archaeological methods. They believe that it is only through the slow, painstaking and unspectacular work of stratigraphic excavation and shard analysis that the mysteries of San Agustin will finally be solved.

DEATH: THE MOST EXCITING PART . . .

AN ASTONISHING number of people, including some famous ones, have tasted death twice. Allen Spraggett's column "The Unexplained" in the *Toronto Sun* reports the experience of the British novelist Somerset Maugham who at the age of 80 sank into what he thought was his final coma.

"I felt myself going," said Maugham. "Time ended. It might have been an hour or a century. The light began to change. To my surprise it did not grow darker but lighter.

"It became iridescent, blinding. I could sense my pulse fading and my heartbeat slowing and still the light increased in intensity. And then, the most exquisite sense of release — a giving up of the whole being," he concluded.

Maugham was hauled back from the brink by an injection and lived more than 10 years longer but he never forgot the profound impression his "death" had made on him.

A NEW VIEW OF HEALING

Part 1

A family doctor's "silly passes," an orthopedic surgeon's "touching and caring" and "picturization" signify a medical revolution in the making.

By James Crenshaw

IN LOS ANGELES Dr. Hans G. Engel, a family physician working experimentally outside his practice in a laboratory environment, made a number of what he calls "silly passes" over a patient who had a severe headache. After about a minute the headache was gone. The patient was amazed. His name: Uri Geller.

At a Colorado ski resort Dr. Robert L. Swearingen, an orthopedic surgeon who regularly treats hundreds of broken bones, fractures and dislocated shoulders every season, suddenly finds that "touching and caring" can do as much to relieve a patient's pain as medication. Now he trains his staff and others, including members of the ski patrol, to use a combination of meditation and visualization to speed up healing.

Then there is Harold Sherman, the noted author of books on ESP, who reveals that he twice used visualization or "picturization" to help bring about his own healing, once with the cooperation of his physician and later to guide himself to the one doctor who could save his life after a specialist had said there was no cure and no hope.

In New York psychologist Dr. Lawrence LeShan conducts seminars in healing for groups that include persons with widely varying backgrounds. Among them are persons in scientific and technical fields, doctors and others who are associated with the or-